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Library Support Staff Today and How it Has Changed

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What is the role of Library Support Staff today and how has it changed over the years?

According to the American Library Association (ALA.org, “Library Support Staff Resource Center”) website, Library support staff, or library paraprofessionals, are involved in all library operations at all levels. They may manage libraries or they may contribute very specialized expertise in some specific field. They may engage in routing activities or supervise and direct other staff. Generalizations about them are difficult to make, and to find an all-encompassing job description, nearly impossible. The range and complexity of their duties varies with each position, the size and type of the library in which they work and each library’s specific needs, goals, or mission.

One important difference in the past is that people working as librarians were expected to have a Master of Library Science degree (MLS), but that has not always been true, nor is it true now. There are people without an MLS degree working in library management just as there are people who have an MLS degree working in support staff positions. I received a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 2005, but have continued working as a Library Technician 3. I know several other people who also have a library degree, but work as library support staff. Unless you are willing and able to relocate, there are not very many opportunities for librarian positions. Some librarian positions also pay less than what some library support staff earn. It also seems that librarian positions have become more specialized over time.

Library support staff positions have also changed over time and are more challenging than they used to be. I started working in the Portland State University Library on August 5, 1986 in a position that would now be considered a Library Technician 1. The majority of my time was spent adding holdings information to shelf list cards and filing them in the card catalog. The following year, I was promoted to a Library Technician 2 position and was trained to catalog books that had Library of Congress records. Two years later, I was again promoted to a Library Technician 3 position and trained to catalog books with participant level records. For several years, everything I cataloged was revised by a Cataloging Librarian. Eventually it was decided that work of Library Technician 3 no longer needed to be revised. Library Technician 3 employees are now expected to catalog using any available records and can create original records when necessary.



In the 28 years I have worked in the Portland State University Library, we have gone from using a card catalog to using an online catalog. We started with Sirsi, then moved to Innovative Interfaces and recently moved to Ex Libris. We haven't had a card catalog for a very long time nor have we had Library Technician 1 employees since the level of work they performed is no longer being done. The area I work in has also changed our name from Technical Services to Resource Services. In 2013, we moved from the Smith Memorial Student Union into the library. During the move, I came across an old organizational chart showing a total of 32 people. This included 22 support staff and 10 librarians. We currently have 13 people, of which seven are library support staff and six are librarians.

Another difference between library support staff and librarians is that librarians are expected, and in some cases required to be involved in professional development. What exactly is professional development? It can include being involved in local, national and international professional committees. It can also include publishing, presenting at or attending professional conferences, or participating in leadership institutes. I believe it is equally important for library support staff to be involved in professional development and there are unlimited opportunities to do this. One place to start is to join a professional organization. I personally would recommend joining the Oregon Library Association (OLA) and its Support Staff Division (OLASSD). If you aren't currently a member, you can go to <http://www.olaweb.org/join-now> to join. Membership is based on income which makes it affordable for library support staff. There is also a special rate of just \$20 for students, unemployed and retired librarians. Joining the Support Staff Division won't cost anything additional. As an OLA member, you will enjoy lower rates to attend the annual conference (the next one is being held at the Eugene Hilton on April 15–17, 2015). It is also a great way to network with other librarians and library support staff. OLASSD has three types of scholarships available to help pay for conference attendance, support staff training, or first time membership into OLA/SSD.

The American Library Association (ALA) also offers reduced membership fees for library support staff. ALA recently changed how they charge for their conference bundled registration and offer a much lower rate for library support staff. The Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT) is only an additional \$10 to join. Other library organizations include the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL Oregon) and the Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA).

It is very easy to volunteer to be on a committee in any one of these organizations. If you are interested in volunteering with OLA, you can get more information at <http://www.olaweb.org/seeking-volunteers>. It is sometimes possible to attend committee meetings virtually making it easier than ever to be involved. I have personally been involved in OLA and OLASSD for over 15 years. I am currently serving as the ALA Representative for OLA. If you want to become more involved in your own community, you should consider volunteering for your local library board or friends group. I work in an academic library so I really enjoy being able to be involved in my public library by serving on its board.

Whatever you decide to do, you should be prepared to use your own resources (whether that is time or money) to be involved in professional development. The benefits you receive will far outweigh what you put into it. I have worked with some amazing people, visited some awesome libraries and have learned about different areas of the library. Most importantly, we as library support staff can and do make a difference in the library profession.



In the 28 years that I have worked in the library, the one thing that has remained a constant for me is that I love what I do. The work I do is both challenging and interesting. I also enjoy having all the opportunities to be involved in OLA and would personally invite you to explore ways in which you too can become involved. We as support staff need to be represented within the library community. Feel free to email me if you have any questions or would like more information.

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